

**Place, Parks and Open Space  
Working Group Meeting Summary  
October 4, 2006**

**Overview**

Rich Bradley, Executive Director of the Downtown BID, gave an overview of the Center City Action Agenda. The DC Office of Planning and the Downtown BID have partnered to create a process as a follow-up to the successful 2000 Downtown Action Agenda. The downtown area is becoming built-out, with only about 5 million square feet of development potential out of a projected 25-30 million square feet over the next five years. One visible trend is development is shifting to areas adjacent to the traditional downtown area, which is to be expected as the core area is built out. Therefore, there is a need to look at a broader area – the Center City. This broader area encompasses the higher-density zoning and mixed-use development types that are found in the downtown area – stretching from Dupont Circle to the SE-SW Waterfront and from Foggy Bottom to Capital Hill.

The Action Agenda will establish a new set of 5-year goals with a list of strategic actions that can be initiated over the next 18 months in order to achieve those goals. Another significant change from the 2000 Action Agenda will be the consideration of qualitative factors, such as sense of place and other quality of life indicators that are more than square feet or dollar value. The planning process will be relatively quick, with a final report issued in February, 2007. A steering committee provides oversight and will sort out priorities between the eight different working groups. The working group process will be an intensive two-meeting process. This first meeting will be for issue identification. The second meeting will be to identify 8-10 strategic actions, with 2-3 high priority actions, to achieve the 5-year goals. The actions can be broadly defined to include future planning studies as well as “bricks and mortar” improvement projects.

**Issue Discussion**

Placemaking

Compared to the great cities of the world, how does the sense of place in DC compare?

DC is “marinating”. The other great cities are more aged. DC needs more attention to streetscapes and the public realm. For example, the sidewalk are in disrepair with a mish-mash of materials – concrete pavers, bricks, and asphalt

patches. Signage is another example that clutters the streetscape. The West End is an example of a messy streetscape with a mix of sidewalk materials and street lighting. The cobra head street lights project into the street trees, which block the light and create dark streets. Pennsylvania Avenue is an example of a well-planned, well-maintained streetscape. It may not be perfect, but it has a consistent quality. Center City streetscapes need to establish a consistent standard for materials and maintenance. Also, there needs to be a consideration of the use of historic materials, such as bricks, which may historically accurate but more difficult to maintain.

DC needs a stronger connection to the waterfront. Most great cities have a strong connection to water. The SE and SW waterfronts are underutilized assets.

Public attitudes need to change to treat DC like a great city. There needs to be a greater pride in ownership and care for the public realm. Great cities are not in disrepair. "Private opulence, public squalor." Private investment is focused on the building, with little or no consideration of the condition of the streetscape. Even simple steps of watering newly planted street trees along the grand avenues is lacking and results in dead trees that are rarely replaced.

Great world cities have more respect for greenspaces, especially in terms of design, access and function. In London, the parks have amenities such as lounge chairs, public art, and fountains that create a relaxing sense of leisure. In terms of the amount of greenspace, DC has more than most U.S. cities. However, the greenspaces are not high quality. There are no places to loiter or gather. For example, the property owners along Barracks Row did not want benches or other furniture as part of the streetscape improvements.

Part of the issue is the inherent conflict that comes with being a capital city. There is a tension between the federal city and the local city. A city is messy, whereas the federal government is looking for order. The DC government is still relatively young. The relationship with the federal government is continuing to evolve and needs to become more complex to deal with these finer grain issues.

Most places are real, and not over planned. Places like Dupont Circle or 14<sup>th</sup> & U Streets evolved organically within the framework of the L'Enfant Plan. But that is not enough, Dupont Circle and Washington Circle are the same size, but very different places due to the design and surrounding land uses.

The West End grew organically, but is still struggling to have a sense of place, so there can be the need of public intervention. The DDOT streetscape improvements along Barracks Row is an example of a public investment that helped create a place. The small areas plans for Mt. Vernon Triangle and NoMA are meant to provide that framework. The concern is that the framework is not established too rigidly that it creates homogeneity.

There is an opportunity to create nodes or activity centers with strong linkages between them – Barracks Row to Southeast Federal Center to the Ballpark area.

### Open Spaces

CapitalSpace is a collaborative effort led by NCPC with the NPS, OP, DDOT, DC Parks and Recreation, and DC Public Schools. It is looking beyond jurisdictional boundaries to assess all of the open space in the District. The process is just completing a needs assessment, followed by a strategic plan with implementing actions.

DC may have a large quantity of open space, but it is not high quality. It is either large or small space, with very little in between. But just having the space is not enough. The need is to take what we have and make it great. More consideration of the users is needed in planning programs and activities. The parks also serve as a working landscape in terms of providing ecosystem services, such as trees for fresh air and stormwater infiltration.

NPS is opposed to transfers of ownership, but is interested in working with stewardship partnerships. Successful examples – NEED EXAMPLE THAT WAS CITED.

### Architecture

Is it good?

There is a lack of confidence in local talent, but experience has shown that the world's great architects do their worst work in DC. It is difficult to deal with the complex regulations. The L'Enfant Plan, the federal overlay, low buildings, setbacks, even climate create a restricted framework that requires different responses. DC needs to celebrate local buildings and architects.

A major threat is dead street frontages. Office uses, such as large lobbies and conference rooms, are leaking into the groundfloor. Banks and brokerages can pay premium rents, but do not add much to the street life. Need active spaces, especially fronting squares and circles. For example, CVS is learning an urban orientation that does not close-up facades.

Security issues create difficulties – “City of Fear”. Security measures are creating dead spaces. Between security and the high rents commanded by dead uses create difficult barriers to activating the street.

Building under matter-of-right zoning also undermines good architecture. Design review creates a better building.

There is very little retail available. The Center City can never have enough retail space. Retail space off of the major avenues and circles and squares provide lower rent space, especially for local, independent retailers. But needs to be

balanced with a framework to create nodes. Georgia Avenue is a continuous retail strip that does not work as a place. The regulatory framework needs to be more form-based, and less use or zoning based to create flexibility and opportunities for unique spaces.

There is a strong economic base. The franchise (the federal government) cannot move. The Center City needs to leverage that strength to create quality places.

Subarea plans are critical. With the Center City, the Mall becomes a central focus and a barrier. The subarea plans are an opportunity to look at connections. There is some question as to how viable the SE/SW Waterfront office market will be without good connections, especially across the freeway. Opening sight lines to make a visual connection can help. M Street will be a critical east-west connection between the SW Waterfront/Fish Market, Waterside Mall, the Ballpark, and the SE Federal Center. South Capitol Street will provide an important north-south connection.

### **Discussion of Possible Strategies & Actions**

The meeting discussion identified three broad themes:

#### Streetscapes

The public realm needs three things:

1. Higher design and improvement standards
2. Re-investment to create value in Center City – Cost-Benefit Analysis, PILOTS and TIFs
3. Active management – more programmed activities

#### Parks and Open Spaces

1. Complete CapitalSpace assessments
2. Extend partnerships
3. Consider changing users (new residents) and adapt designs
4. Identify strategic/catalytic projects that will make places better
5. Schools are opportunity sites

How do we make what we have better?

#### Architecture

1. Create a report describing DC design precepts and principles
2. Learn from successful places – both in DC and other great cities
3. Raise expectations of private spaces – design, use, maintenance
4. Instill a higher design vision, especially for opportunity sites
5. Shift from matter-of-right zoning to PUD and design review
6. Shift to performance/form-based regulations

Where are the bold moves?